DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 259 215 CE 041 957

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TITLE	Reentry Programs for Dropouts in Adult Settings. Overview. ERIC Digest No. 45.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Columbus, Ohio.
SPONS AGENCY	National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	85
CONTRACT	400-84-0004
NOTE	3p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Adult Education; *Adult Programs; Adult Students; Continuing Education; Delivery Systems; *Dropout Characteristics; *Dropout Programs; Educational Needs; *Educational Practices; Educational Strategies; High School Equivalency Programs; Outreach Programs; Postsecondary Education; *Reentry Students; Student Characteristics; Student Needs; Technical Education; Two Year Colleges

ABSTRACT

Besides having to cope with the usual pressures associated with the transition to adulthood, dropouts must deal with the stigma attached to the fact that they are school dropouts. Research reveals that, for a variety of socioeconomic and psychological reasons, dropouts are generally less able to plan, less willing to work hard, and less skilled in writing. Programs available for out-of-school youths range from those sponsored by community colleges and public schools to those offered by educational agencies in conjunction with employment and training programs. Three particularly noteworthy types of reentry programs for dropouts in adult settings are programs sponsored by technical schools, outreach programs, and continuing education high school programs. In general, successful programs for young adults reentering the educational system are sensitive to the stresses faced by young adults, possess a warm and flexible environment, provide a clear understanding of what teachers expect of students, offer individual counseling and curricula relevant to individual student needs, and offer students continuous constructive feedback. (MN)

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ERIC DIGEST NO. 45

Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

OVERVIEW

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REENTRY PROGRAMS FOR DROPOUTS IN ADULT SETTINGS

Young adults are confronted with various developmental issues as they move from adolescence into adulthood. Merriam (1984) discusses three issues involving psychological development: independence, identity, and intimacy. Young adults who leave school prior to obtaining a high school diploma experience an additional set of anxieties. Besides coping with psychological and sociological issues associated with maturity, they face stigmas attached to the fact that they are school dropouts.

Characteristics of Dropouts

Research reveals that dropouts exhibit similar cognitive and affective characteristics. Weber and Silvani-Lacey (1983) report that dropouts scored lower on intelligence tests (mean IQ of 90), had repeated at least one grade, had limited academic success accompanied by poor academic performance, and had demonstrated poor reading and communications skills. Affectively, dropouts were loners who felt alienated from their school environment, peers, and teachers; were not accepted or respected by their teachers; generally lacked interest in school and school work; had a low self-concept as reflected in lack of self-satisfaction and social maturity; and exhibited actions that were either hostile and unruly or passive and apathetic. Other trends among the dropouts included low family income, excessive absenteeism, and lack of parental encouragement. Buckingham (1984), noting that undereducated young adults are both a burden and a cost to society, drew a correlation between the characteristics of these young adults and their inability to gain employment. He emphasized that these young adults are disadvantaged by their poor social adjustment, inability to relate to authority figures, lack of future orientation, and inability to tolerate structured activities. They have battered self-images, fear taking risks, and are deficient in skills needed for survival in today's technological society. All of these factors lead to developmental stresses that are further exacerbated by the negative status attached to being a dropout.

Furthermore in a society in which the school completion rate is nearly 80 percent, those who do not achieve a high school diploma are at a distinct disadvantage. Undereducated young adults find it difficult to avail themselves of further education, take part in training programs, or secure entry-level jobs without a high school diploma.

Perspectives on Reentry Young Adults

Smith (1984) discusses a community college high school completion program for adults. Although the program is designed for adults of any age, over half of the participants range in age from 17 to 21 years. Generally, the young adults in this program viewed their dropping out of high school as a "derailment" in their lives and wanted to obtain a diploma not only to ease family pressures, but also to become marketable in the employment arena. They perceived of themselves as being able to succeed in the program without attending every class or completing every assignment. They had a cynical view of high school completion, considering it a "rite of passage." Despite the fact that young adults did not display a "learning for learning's sake" attitude, they did enjoy being with the older adults in the program who provided them encouragement and support.

Teachers in the community college program viewed these young adults as less able to plan, less willing to work hard, and less skilled in writing. Teachers felt that they did not appreciate the use of teaching methods designed for adults.

Initially the older students tended to categorize young dropouts as troublemakers, although they perceived those in the high school completion program more favorably. They felt that for the academically sound student, dropping out of a "problem" school was a smart move, and they sought to support these students.

The counseling staff viewed the younger students as immature, but felt they were best served by being treated as adults. They were perplexed with the way dropouts berated themselves and with their attitude that going back to school was "penance." Counselors perceived that school completion was a pressing need for these students whose desire it was to put high school behind them and rid themselves of their troubling emotional baggage.

Types of Programs Available for Out-of-School Youth

Programs available for out-of-school youths range from those sponsored by community colleges and public schools to those offered by educational agencies in conjunction with employment and training programs. Smith (1984) reports that there is an increased trend for young adults to enroll in such adult education programs as adult basic education and high school completion in an effort to "get back on track."

Programs Sponsored by Technical Schools

Technical school programs combine basic skills instruction with occupational training. Typically, students enrolled in these programs spend a designated number of hours per day in basic skills instruction and the remainder of the day at a job site. Programs of this nature are designed to address needs of less advantaged adults and to provide a high-quality, humanistic education to people who have dropped out of or have been expelled from traditional schools. Buckingham (1984) outlines major tenets involved with integrating basic education with job training:

- Employ a staff committed and dedicated to understanding the issues and problems facing the students
- Design a highly structured program that is flexible enough to accommodate individual needs

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- Utilize assessment procedures and intake interviews
- Provide immediate feedback
- Design a high-interest, low-level curriculum that focuses on life skills and academics
- Develop linkages with area agencies and educational institutions
- Operate as a service-oriented agency

Outreach Programs

Baker (1983) reports on a program that dealt with obstacles preventing enrollment at a local community college: transportation, conflicting work hours, socioeconomic factors. Basic skills instruction was provided to middle-aged workers, senior citizens, and youth who had dropped out of traditional education programs. In this instance, the college convinced community leaders that group meeting places such as community centers, churches, and businesses could be converted into learning centers. In addition, the college decided to integrate an instructional delivery system to include three mechanisms external to the college: a site where instruction could be delivered, unserved adult learners, and portable mobile vans with educational materials and staffed by instructional personnel. The college purchased and converted two vans into student-managed curriculum facilities that housed curriculum, records, and supplies. These combination bookmobiles-classrooms provided educational opportunities for adults at various locations.

A facilitator and several volunteers comprised the teaching team. The staff assisted the adults with planning their programs and with record keeping. In addition, instructional and community resource people were brought in to work with the adults. This team approach provided flexibility and relevance without sacrificing traditional curricula standards. Likewise, this team approach assisted adults with problem-solving and decision-making skills.

There were three keys to the success of this program. First, it created a positive learning experience for the adults. They could rapidly acquire basic skills and then use them effectively to solve personal and work-related problems. Second, the student-managed aspect sought to persuade adults to commit a scheduled time to the program. Third, the program helped the adults obtain a job if they were unemployed or to compete for a better job if they were employed.

Continuing Education High School

Continuing education high school programs are often under the sponsorship of public school systems. A report issued by the Columbus (Ohio) Public Schools (1983) describes a program designed as an alternative educational opportunity for students between the ages of 16 and 22. Eligible young adults include individuals with excessive absenteeism or the inability to cope in the traditional school environment, individuals who dropped out of school and lacked sufficient skills to be self-supporting, and individuals presently enrolled in high school but unable to take desired courses due to scheduling conflicts.

The school provides for flexible, individualized scheduling of educational programs, career education and job skill training, basic skills instruction, college preparatory level courses, counseling, and job placement.

A key to the success of this type of program is the staff. Staff members who are an asset to continuing education programs possess a concern about individual student needs, are flexible in their approach to instruction, are willing to change, are skilled at developing competency-based instruction, keep updated by attending staff development programs, and have the interpersonal skills necessary for working with young adults.

Characteristics of Successful Programs

Darkenwald and Knox (1984) suggest the following as attributes of successful programs:

- A sensitivity to the stresses that young adults face and to the inner turmoils that they are experiencing. Behavior of young adults is often symptomatic of their struggles for identity and independence.
- A warm, flexible environment that bears little resemblance to the structured atmosphere and social climate of traditional high school settings.
- Clear understanding of what teachers expect of students and of what students can expect from teachers. Young adults must understand that they are responsible for their own learning and that the staff is available to assist with problems.
- An instructional program for each student that provides constructive, continuous feedback and flexibility within a structured approach.
- A curriculum relevant to the needs of the students. Attention should be focused on the need of young adults for career guidance, survival, and coping skills.
- Informal counseling on an individual and group basis. Young adults need both emotional support and a process for identifying and resolving potential or existing problems.

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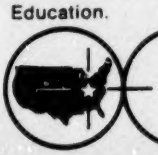
This ERIC Digest was developed by Kathleen K. Thiel, ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, with funding by the National Institute of Education, U.S. Department of Education, under Contract No. NIE-C-400-84-0004. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of NIE or the Department of Education.



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